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## ROBERT BLOOMFIELD

BY A. H. R. FAIRCHILD

Rummaging about, a few years ago, in a side-street, Oxford bookshop, I came upon a stall marked, "3d each." The books were battered and scarred; they had served their human ends; and now, derelicts of an earlier day, they were cheapened into such insignificance that only the curious granted them a moment's inspection. As I gave the rows a cursory glance, about to pass on, my eye fell upon what had once been a handsome binding. Suspecting some unusual bit of human interest, I drew the volume out. It was polished full-calf, artistically tooled. Turning the volume over for a moment, I speculated on the hand that once had treasured the little work. Then I read the title-page: *The Farmer's Boy; A Rural Poem*. By Robert Bloomfield. The Fifth Edition, London, MDCCCI.

Robert Bloomfield! Who was he? His name I had seen, but never a line of his had I read. A glance at the contents of the little volume showed that he aspired to be a nature poet, and that he followed Thomson's division of the seasons. A score of questions crowded my mind. Where did he live? Under what circumstances did he write his poems? Who of the greater men of the day, especially poets, knew anything of Bloomfield and his work? The fifth edition! Probably there were more. Was Bloomfield one of those poets of the people, read, appreciated, even beloved in his day, while others, later grouped among the great, gained but a grudging contemporary acknowledgment of presumptive genius? Was this a poet who gripped the heart of the common people, while others of greater merit went unread? If so, why had Bloomfield fallen into such fateful neglect?

I bought the volume, gratified to learn later in a well-regulated bookshop up town that my neglected poet, in the same edition and binding, was esteemed at four shillings. Since then I have picked up, here and there, copies of practically all Bloomfield's work, with a book or two about him and his country, produced in his own day;<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>One of these is E. W. Brayley's *Views in Suffolk, Norfolk, and Northamptonshire Illustrative of the Works of Robert Bloomfield, Accompanied*

and, in odd hours, I have attempted to build up something of the background of the author's life.

Without question a minor poet, not of the second but of the third or fourth rank, Bloomfield has yet fallen into a neglect in some degree unmerited. His *Farmer's Boy* once brought cheer and happiness to thousands of hearts; and his songs and lyrics, though far from the best, have occasional notes of genuine sweetness. Yet Bloomfield not only goes unread today; he is quite unknown to most students of literature. In his day he was known to Coleridge, Lamb, Nathan Drake, Byron, Hazlitt, John Wilson of *Blackwood's*, and other prominent men of letters; and though Byron<sup>2</sup> did not look upon his work with favor, Coleridge, Lamb (eventually), and others did, some even extending him extravagant praise. Chambers, in his *Cyclopaedia* (1842), represents the beginning of the more recent notice of Bloomfield. Stopford Brooke, Thomas Arnold, Mr. Saintsbury, and Mr. Gosse follow,<sup>3</sup> each with more or less notice and criticism; and Mr. Bullen has a brief article in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. With the exception of Mr. Bullen, these later critics appear merely to have read the excerpts and the discussion given by Chambers; they have repeated most of Chambers' errors; and they have added others of their own.<sup>4</sup> Mr. Bullen, whose obligations involved both thoroughness and accuracy, seems to have given Bloomfield's work, especially the later part of it, merely a cursory examination; his article, succinct though it is,

*with Descriptions*, etc., London, 1818. Plates, and handsomely printed. Similar volumes had been issued for Cowper and Burns.

<sup>2</sup> *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, p. 120, Ox. edit. Byron rounds up with

Him too the mania, not the muse, has seized;  
Not inspiration, but a mind diseased.

Bullen, (*op. cit.*) says Byron "referred to Bloomfield in complimentary terms." I have been unable to find any such passage.

<sup>3</sup> *A Primer of English Literature; A Manual of English Literature; A History of Nineteenth Century Literature; and Modern English Literature*, respectively.

<sup>4</sup> Chambers implies that the date for *The Farmer's Boy* is 1798, when he says that Bloomfield was thirty-two on its publication. The correct date is 1800. Brooke and Gosse, apparently following Chambers, also give the wrong date, 1798. Saintsbury gives 1760, instead of 1766, as the date of the poet's birth. Arnold says Bloomfield's father, who was a tailor, was a shoemaker.

contains several errors and lacks in discriminating appreciation. However insignificant Bloomfield may be, he has the common right to be read, if he is to be judged, especially if he is to be judged unfavorably. And with the exception of Chambers, all critics are distinctly adverse in attitude. Among recent critics Bloomfield has not only fallen into neglect; he has fallen into disfavor. Possibly a reconsideration of his life and his poetry may win him a little more recognition and a more just estimate of his work.

## I

Robert Bloomfield, youngest in a family of six children, was born in the village of Honington, Suffolk, on December 3, 1766.<sup>5</sup> His father, George Bloomfield, who was a tailor, died of smallpox when Robert was less than a year old.<sup>6</sup> His mother, Elizabeth, daughter of Robert Manby, was the village schoolmistress. Lacking a school building, Mrs. Bloomfield taught Robert and her older children, along with others belonging to neighbors, at her home, so that Robert's formal instruction was confined to what he there received, except for two or three months' instruction in writing at the school of a Mr. Rodwell of Ixworth Thorp. Other ascertainable facts of Robert's childhood are without special significance or importance.<sup>7</sup>

The humble occupation of Robert's mother and the number of her children, increased by the issue of a second marriage in 1773,<sup>8</sup> made acute the problem of providing for all. Accordingly, in 1777, at the early age of eleven years, Robert was sent to an uncle, William Austin, a tenant of the Duke of Grafton and farmer of Sapiston, which adjoined Honington. Here Robert slept in the garret, and labored as farm boy. He was not unhappy, however. Though classed with the servant boys, he yet received, in common with them, the same treatment as Mr. Austin's sons; and he later entertained the kindest memories of his life at Sapiston and of his uncle:

<sup>5</sup> The account here given is based primarily upon material contained in Bloomfield's works.

<sup>6</sup> The burial at midnight, the family distress, and the horror inspired by the fell disease are all described in *Good Tidings*.

<sup>7</sup> Chief of these was his mother's reading of *Goody-two-Shoes*, the precepts of which made a life-long impression. v. *Remains*, II, pp. 120-21.

<sup>8</sup> Fourteen children blessed this marriage,—a total of twenty!

By deeds of hospitality endear'd  
Served from affection, for his worth rever'd.

(*Farmer's Boy*, p. 6).<sup>\*</sup>

It was, indeed, in these years at Sapiston that Robert acquired a body of experience which was later to be the foundation of his poetical work. As compared with those about him, he had keen sensibilities; and if his perceptive powers never carried him very deep into the heart of nature, he at least acquired an intimate knowledge of rural occupations and manners that subsequently was recognized by others in his station as true to life:

The fields his study, nature was his book.

(*Ib.*, p. 5).

As Robert was frail in physique and small of stature, Mr. Austin soon realized that he was ill-equipped for earning his living by hard labor, and he had the good sense to inform the boy's mother. Mrs. Bloomfield thereupon wrote to her sons, George and Nathaniel, who were living in London, soliciting their aid. An arrangement was made, accordingly, whereby Robert should live with George, who was a shoemaker, and learn his trade, and that Nathaniel, who was a tailor, should furnish his clothes. On the receipt of this offer, Mrs. Bloomfield prepared to take Robert to London, and the first significant turning point in the poet's career had been reached.

On Friday, June 29, 1781, at the age of fifteen, Robert was brought to London. Here he lived with his brother George, at Mr. Simm's, 7 Pitcher's Court,<sup>10</sup> obscurely tucked away in Bell Alley, Coleman Street. His quarters were a light garret, where five shoemakers worked. Besides being taught the shoemaker's trade, Robert was errand boy, fetching dinners from the cook-shop, and doing whatever else was required: "A Gibeonite, that serves them all by turns." His most common occupation was to read the newspapers to the others. To help Robert with the hard words in the paper, particularly in the speeches of Fox and North, a difficulty of which the boy complained, his brother George bought him a dictionary. On Sundays, after a walk in the country, Robert went to hear the dissenting minister Fawcett at the meeting house in the old Jewry, possibly seeing Wordsworth, who was interested in Fawcett and

<sup>\*</sup> References throughout to the fifth edition.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. p. viii, Preface, *The Farmer's Boy*. Bullen says "Fisher's Court."

attended those meetings whenever he came up to London. Occasionally, Robert also went to a debating society at Coachmaker's Hall; and "a few times" he visited Covent Garden Theatre. To the men in the shop he read a history of England, *The British Traveller*, a geography which came weekly, and the *London Magazine*, in the Poet's Corner of which he was especially interested. As early as his first coming to London, Robert had begun to try his hand at verse. His brother speaks of his having made smooth verse to an old tune in 1783, when he was seventeen; but it was not until 1786, when Robert was twenty, that any of his verses were published. One of the first was a poem called *The Soldier's Return*; <sup>11</sup> another was one of sixteen anapaestic lines, *A Village Girl*.

At some time between 1781 and 1784, the Bloomfields took new lodgings. Here Robert became acquainted with James Kay of Dundee, "a man of singular character," who had many books, among them *Paradise Lost* and *The Seasons*. These he lent to Robert, who, Mr. Brayler tells us, "was particularly delighted with *The Seasons*, and studied it with peculiar attention." <sup>12</sup> In 1784 trouble arose between Mr. Chamberlayne, by whom George and Robert were employed, and the journeymen shoemakers; and Robert, to avoid the storm, returned, on Mr. Austin's invitation, to the Sapiston farm. Here, for the space of two months, <sup>13</sup> he renewed his acquaintance with rural sights, sounds, and occupations, greatly to the satisfaction and joy of his mind and heart. As the shoemaker's trouble remained unsettled, it was arranged that Robert

<sup>11</sup> Printed in *Remains*, 1. p. 35.

<sup>12</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 12. For one of literary aspirations, Bloomfield read but little. Besides those named, he seems to have read: Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare*; *The Task*: Burns, in part; *The Bard*; Pope, in part; Dryden's *Virgil*; *The Lyrical Ballads*; Southey's *Thalaba*, first book; Shenstone; *The Gentleman's Magazine*; *Robinson Crusoe*; Hawkin's *General History of the Science and Practice of Music*; Smollet's *Count Fathom*; and poems by Mason, Bruce, Park, and others. Bloomfield praised Thomson, and doubtless drew from him the hint to write down his own impressions of "the changing year"; but a careful examination of their poems, contrary to first expectations, reveals practically nothing in the form of direct influence. There are a few not unnatural coincidences; but in details of subject, in diction, and in style the two poems are essentially different. Capel Lofft, Bloomfield's editor, himself found *The Farmer's Boy* independent of *The Seasons*.

<sup>13</sup> Bullen says three months.

should return to London and become a regularly bound apprentice. He was accordingly indentured to John Dudbridge, a Freeman of London. Shortly after this time, Robert's brother George left London permanently for Bury St. Edmunds, having looked after Robert for a period of nearly five years. From the time of George's departure for Bury, Robert began a new era in his life. He was of age, or almost so; he was independent; and he was thrown upon his own resources.

Bloomfield's next act was an important one, not for his poetry, but for his life. On December 12, 1790, he married Mary Anne Church of Woolwich, writing his brother that he had sold his fiddle (which he had evidently learned to play meanwhile) and got a wife. It was his father-in-law, Joseph Church, a boat-builder in the Government shipyard, who sent the couple their first present towards housekeeping, the "old oak table" on which Robert wrote out *The Farmer's Boy*, and about which he later composed the poem entitled *To My Old Oak Table*.<sup>14</sup> At first the young couple lived in furnished lodgings; later they hired a room at 14 Bell Alley, Coleman Street. In the light garret above, Robert had the privilege of working at his trade. In the autumn of the year following the marriage, the first child, Hannah, was born. In December Robert wrote his father-in-law, enclosing a copy of some verses he had put down from memory, and adding the remark: "Before I was married, I often amused myself with such compositions, and had several pieces published in the newspapers, magazines, etc.; but I find other employment now . . ." <sup>15</sup> Evidently the desire to write verses was still working in him, a desire which was to express itself some five or six years later in the writing of his chief poem. It was the writing of this poem which was to change his whole manner of living, his outlook on life, his social standing, and even the environment of his relatives and descendants.

Bloomfield tells us that he began composing *The Farmer's Boy* after he had been married six years, and during the last illness of the poet Burns,—presumably, then, in the spring of 1797.<sup>16</sup> The

<sup>14</sup> *Wild Flowers*.

<sup>15</sup> *Remains*, I, p. 12.

<sup>16</sup> "He died but two months after I began composing *The Farmer's Boy*! though at that time, and long after, his death and his history were unknown to me." *Remains*, II, p. 78.

part of the poem first written was that describing the morning scene in *Spring*, beginning:

This task had Giles, in fields remote from home:  
Oft had he wish'd the rosy morn to come.

(p. 10).

Inasmuch as Bloomfield composed nine-tenths of the poem as he worked at his last, with six or seven other workmen about, he had to remember the lines and write them down afterwards. For this reason, he says, he composed in rhyme, as the lines were easier to remember. *Winter* and half of *Autumn* were thus composed long before he committed a word of them to paper; the entire poem he wrote out but once, retaining no copy. Having had no instruction in grammar, he says, he did not pretend to know how to manage the "stops."

The manuscript of this poem Bloomfield first took, in June, 1798, to W. Bent, published of the *Universal Magazine*. Within a week or two it was returned, with an accompanying note stating that the publisher declined to criticise it. It was then offered by Bloomfield to Lane, publisher of novels. Lane sent it back within a few hours, with a brief, curt note, saying it was "not in his line." The manuscript was next offered to Dilly, in the *Poultry*. Dilly finally told Bloomfield that the poem would not do for separate publication unless he got someone to revise it. He advised Bloomfield to take it to the publisher Phillips, who might publish it for him in the *Monthly Magazine*; but since Bloomfield knew that he would have to pay five or six shillings for a copy to send to his mother—his primary object in publication—he did not do this, but sent it instead to his brother George, at Bury. With Robert's permission, George took the manuscript to Capel Lofft, at Troston. This was in November, 1798. Lofft, delighted with the poem, took it to Thomas Hill. It was immediately recommended to Hood for publication. The necessary revision and the general editing of the poem were undertaken by Lofft. Between the publication and this time, some fifteen months elapsed, a total period of almost two years after the poem was completed. During this period Robert, never of robust physique, was in poor health to the point of actual illness. Two months after his illness, *The Farmer's Boy* appeared "in sumptuous quarto," March, 1800; and soon Bloomfield received his first compensation, something under a hundred pounds, from the



Duke of Grafton. For a considerable period after this time Bloomfield's prosperity was assured. The publication of *The Farmer's Boy* was the most important event in his life.

The poem immediately became popular. In two years and three-quarters it ran up to the astonishing sale of 26,000 copies. One edition followed hard upon another.<sup>17</sup> The entire poem was translated into French and Italian, and the first book was turned by some admirer into Latin.<sup>18</sup> It was favorably mentioned by such papers as the *New London Review* and the *Monthly Mirror*; and it was reviewed by Mr. Swan in *The Ladies Museum*. Within a few weeks Bloomfield's fame had spread, and, in his own words, he "became known to the literary, and esteemed by the good." Fox sent him a letter in his own handwriting. Through the benevolence of the Duke of Grafton he was enabled to return to his native village in May, 1800, after an absence of twelve years. He visited at Bury, probably with his brother George, where he was received "with an emulous desire of his society"; visited his mother, an occasion of rare joy, no doubt; made himself at home at Troston, under the hospitality of Capel Lofft; and, by Sir Charles Bunbury and many other people in Suffolk, was given the "welcome of a friend and a countryman." On May 30, after his return to London, he wrote a poem, *On Revisiting the Place of My Nativity*, May, 1800.

For Bloomfield it was a day of favors at the hand of fortune. The Duke of Grafton renewed his benevolence in the form of an invitation to the entire family to spend a month at Wakefield Lodge. A considerable income was gradually produced; and Bloomfield enjoyed the recognition and the munificence of many friends and admirers. Notable among these was the Duke of York. High esteem for the poet's character, and pleasure in reading *The Farmer's Boy* were testified to by Nathan Drake, distinguished writer of books on Shakespeare; by many of Drake's friends, several of whom belonged to the clergy; by Mr. Green of Ipswich; by Mrs. Opie, the "Muse of Lichfield" and wife of the artist; and by many others. Charles Lamb, in a letter to Manning, speaks of having had the felicity of hearing Dyer read one book of *The Farmer's Boy*

<sup>17</sup> There were at least fifteen.

<sup>18</sup> Lofft says he saw the French version, and that it was handsomely printed, with neat copper-plate copies of the wood engravings by Bewick.

to a group of friends. Before meeting Bloomfield, Lamb seems to have had an unfavorable impression of him;<sup>19</sup> but he wrote later to Bernard Barton: "I have been reading your stanzas 'On Bloomfield,' which are the most appropriate that can be imagined,—sweet with Doric delicacy . . . He dined with me once, and his manners took me exceedingly."

Some time after 1800, and before 1802, Bloomfield and his family moved to "a very small house" in the City Road. By September 13, 1801, the manuscript of *The Miller's Maid*, and probably that of others of the *Rural Tales*, was in the hands of the editor, Capel Lofft. This volume, made up chiefly of poems written during the fifteen months between the completion and the publication of *The Farmer's Boy*, included representative pieces like *Rosy Hannah*, *The Fakenham Ghost*, and *A Highland Drover*. While the volume was being printed Bloomfield got his first sight of *The Lyrical Ballads*.<sup>20</sup> In August, 1802, Coleridge wrote to Southey that he thought he might write a criticism highly satisfactory "to the admirers of the poet Bloomfield, and to the friends of the man Bloomfield."<sup>21</sup> Coleridge's projected plan, much to our regret, was never carried out. On the word of Bloomfield's son, a printer, Chambers says that "Mr. Rogers exerted himself to procure a pension for Bloomfield, and Mr. Southey also took much interest in his welfare. . . ."<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *Letters*, I, p. 218, and pp. 118-19 (Ainger ed.)

<sup>20</sup> Bloomfield's discriminating appreciation of Wordsworth's early work has, so far as I am aware, hitherto gone unnoticed. In *Remains*, II, p. 119. Bloomfield writes:

"I go with pleasure and anxiety along with 'Betty Fay' (Foy?) by moonlight: it is truly a charming night. 'The Thorn,' with all its simplicity, I shall never forget. 'Simon Lee,' 'We are Seven,' and 'The Nightingale,' in their Eve-like nakedness, I feel greatly pleased with. *Resolved* to read them through attentively."

"I don't much relish 'The Pet Lamb.' The 'Poet's Reverie' (Dream?) sounds too much like a madman's reverie. It should not be in the same book with 'Michael' and 'The Brothers.'"

It seems not improbable that, through Coleridge, if not directly, Wordsworth knew of Bloomfield's poetry; possible, even, that he read some of it and gathered suggestions from it. It would be quite in accord with the manner of Wordsworth, whose intellectual egotism is outstanding, to make no reference whatever to Bloomfield.

<sup>21</sup> *Letters*, I, p. 395.

<sup>22</sup> Probably Charles, at Canterbury. v. Chambers, II, p. 284 (ed. 1868).

In the years that immediately follow, there is nothing noteworthy. According to Mr. Bullen, Bloomfield received from the Duke of Grafton the post of undersealer in the Seal Office; and later, when he had resigned the office on account of ill health, received from the Duke an allowance of a shilling a day. After leaving the Seal Office Bloomfield employed himself making Æolian harps; then he engaged in the book trade, but soon became bankrupt.<sup>23</sup> In 1803, on the anniversary of the birthday of Dr. Jenner, the discoverer of smallpox vaccine, Bloomfield sang a song of his own composition; and the next year published *Good Tidings*, a poem dealing with the subject of vaccination, and recounting also his father's death. This poem so pleased Dr. Jenner that he presented the author with "a durable and gratifying memorial of his esteem." In December of this year, Bloomfield composed the poem *My Old Oak Table*. In the summer of the year following, 1804, Bloomfield's mother made her last visit to London. In December she died as the result of a paralytic stroke; and the Duke of Grafton erected a tombstone over her grave. In 1805, Bloomfield's sister Elizabeth, who was living at Georgetown, Virginia, wrote: "Your poems, etc., make quite a bustle here; they are printing again at New York, Baltimore, and Philadelphia; and before I left Philadelphia the Governor of the State sent for me."<sup>24</sup> In the summer of 1807<sup>25</sup> Bloomfield made a tour down the River Wye and through a part of South Wales with a party of friends from Gloucestershire. He kept a journal of the trip; and four years later published a long poem on the subject, called *The Banks of Wye*. Between this date and 1823 Bloomfield's income from his writings diminished appre-

<sup>23</sup> Both circumstances are mentioned also by *Americana* (III) and Chambers, probably following W. H. Hart's *Selections from the Correspondence of Robert Bloomfield*, London, 1870. For reprint of pamphlet, *Nature's Music*, etc. and *Poetical Testimonials in Honour of the Harp of Aeolus*, see *Remains*, I, pp. 93 et seq.

<sup>24</sup> Brayley, p. 19. It appears that the Governor, whose name was Bloomfield, wished to find himself related to the poet. Bloomfield at one time had considerable vogue in America, as the following partial list of American editions indicates: *The Farmer's Boy*, five; *Wild Flowers*, one; *The Banks of Wye*; *The Fakenham Ghost* (Rural Tales), two. Collections: *The Farmer's Boy*, *Rural Tales*, etc., 1803; *Poems*, two parts in four vols., 1803; *Poems*, 1821.

<sup>25</sup> Bullen says 1811.

ciably; and he retired to Shefford, Bedfordshire, where he remained until his death.

Of the details of the closing period of Bloomfield's life little that is definite is known. The chief circumstances are that his health declined, his income was reduced, and he published three volumes. In June, 1814, he made a short trip to Canterbury and Dover. Three years later he published his volume *May Day with the Muses*.<sup>26</sup> In 1823, the last year of the poet's life, he published a three-act drama entitled *Hazelwood Hall*. Bloomfield died on August 19, 1823, aged fifty-seven years. He left a widow and four children.

## II

It was *The Farmer's Boy* that made Bloomfield's reputation.<sup>27</sup> Written for the common people, the poem celebrates, through the several seasons, the activities of the farmer folk. The dominant note is clearly moral and religious. But pervading the poem are other qualities: a kindly and gentle spirit, a strong human sympathy, a modest independence, and a philosophic calm that outfaces and rises superior to poverty, hardship, and sordidness in life. Reflecting the lives of the very humble and the very poor, the poem redeems their sorrows, even while it sweetens their occasional joys; it consoles and comforts; and it points the way to an enduring happiness. *The Farmer's Boy* is a democratic poem written before the democratic idea became widespread; before, indeed, it was generally current. It sprang from native soil. Its material, too, was a first-hand discovery. Its readers were no doubt as much surprised to find that poetry lay all about them as the author was delighted to discover that life among the very humble and the very poor is worthy of being celebrated in poetry.

The moral quality of *The Farmer's Boy* is at times almost pathetic in its naïveté. "The Farmer's life," says Bloomfield,

. . . displays in every part  
A moral lesson to the sensual heart, (*Summer*, p. 27).

<sup>26</sup> Bullen gives date of 2d edn. 1822 instead of 1817.

<sup>27</sup> Bloomfield's principal works are: *The Farmer's Boy*, 1800; *Rural Tales, Ballads and Songs*, 1802; *Good Tidings*, 1804; *Wild Flowers*, 1806; *The Banks of Wye*, 1811; *May Day with the Muses*, 1817; *Hazelwood Hall, a Village Drama*, 1823; *The Remains of Robert Bloomfield*, edited by Joseph Weston, 2 vols., 1824.

and even if one knows that things must be strained somewhat to find it so, one cannot altogether withhold a certain admiration for the moral quality of the soul capable of finding it in such surroundings, for,

. . . where the joy, if rightly understood,  
Like cheerful praise for universal good? (*Ib.*, p. 43).

This active perception of the moral purpose of the universe is, consciously or otherwise, the poet's answer to those who held that nature denied God and His purposes. Nature, in Bloomfield, is a medium of redemption from the sense of human sin and abasement.

This sweet and pensive if somewhat indiscriminating moral perception is at times transfused into religion by Bloomfield; for the beauty of nature "stamps devotion on th' inquiring mind."<sup>28</sup> In the summer season, the "ripening Harvest rustles in the gale," and Giles, the farm boy, enjoys the view of nature:

A glorious sight, . . .  
That glads the Ploughman's Sunday morning's round,  
. . . . .  
The Tow'ring fabric, or the dome's loud roar,  
And stedfast columns, may astonish more,  
Where the charmed gazer long delighted stays,  
Yet traced but to the *architect* the praise;  
Whilst here, the veriest clown that treads the sod,  
Without one scruple gives the praise to God.

Something approaching religious elevation is found in the closing lines of the poem:

ETERNAL POWER! from whom those blessings flow,  
Teach me still to wonder, more to know:  
. . . . .  
And let me ever, midst my bounties, raise  
An humble note of thankfulness and praise! (*Winter*, p. 99).

As Weston says, Bloomfield's prevailing aim was "to fill the heart with that holy awe, which the silent contemplation of infinite goodness alone can inspire."<sup>29</sup>

As Bloomfield treats it, this moral and religious sentiment broadens out into something of a social philosophy:

<sup>28</sup> *Spring*, p. 6.

<sup>29</sup> *Remains*, I, xvii.

Thine heart should feel, what thou may'st hourly see,  
*That duty's basis is humanity.* (Winter, p. 83).

No poet, not even Burns, is more democratic than Bloomfield. His conception of democracy is based, however, not so much upon a sense of justice and political rights, though these are occasionally referred to, as upon man's inalienable right, irrespective of rank, to a measure of human happiness. Throughout Bloomfield's poetry the "sweet theme is universal joy."<sup>30</sup> Even

To him whose drudgery unheeded goes,  
 His joys unreckon'd as his cares or woes, (Spring, p. 4).

this is so. To Giles, "meek, fatherless, and poor," "labour his portion,"

. . . as revolving SEASONS chang'd the scene  
 From heat to cold, tempestuous to serene,  
 Though every change still varied his employ,  
 Yet each new duty brought its share of joy. (Spring, p. 5).

Any social philosophy dealing with abuses is bound to be largely negative in its expressions; sometimes it is bitter. Bloomfield is never bitter. But he resents the injustice and the iniquity of false class distinctions with a spirit that frequently reminds one of Burns.<sup>31</sup> Speaking of the harvest festival, he recalls the day

Ere tyrant customs strength sufficient bore  
 To violate the feelings of the poor;  
 To leave them distanc'd in the madd'ning race,  
 Where'er Refinement shews its hated face:  
 Nor causeless hatred:—'tis the peasant's curse,

<sup>30</sup> Spring, p. 23.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. the following: "The sovereign contempt with which too many of the wealthy, and (I fear also) of the learned, look upon what are termed 'the dregs of the people,' has often raised an equal contempt on my side, for that wealth, which engenders such thought of immense distance, which these 'dregs are from the surface.'" *Remains*, II, p. 71. Also the passage: "I feel peculiarly gratified in finding that a poor man in England may assert the dignity of Virtue, and speak of the imperishable beauties of Nature, and be heard, and heard, perhaps, with greater attention for his being poor." Pref. to *Rural Tales*, p. iv. Cf. also:

Teach me unjust distinctions to deride,  
 And falsehoods gender'd in the brain of Pride.  
 (To My Old Oak Table, p. 28).

That hourly makes his wretched station worse;  
 Destroys life's intercourse; the social plan  
 That rank to rank cements, as man to man. (*Summer*, p. 46).

Still, Bloomfield is able to say that

. . . not one lying line to riches bows,  
 Or poison'd sentiment from rancour flows. (*Autumn*, p. 71).

A natural accompaniment of this democratic feeling for humanity displayed by Bloomfield is a marked sympathy for animals, a sentiment by no means familiar then as now. There is no mawkishness. With sense as well as sentiment the lot of the farm-horse is compared with that of the post-horse:

Thy chains were freedom, and thy toils repose,  
 Could the poor *post-horse* tell thee all his woes;  
 . . . . .  
 Drops chase each other down his chest and sides,  
 And spatter'd mud his native color hides:  
 Thro' his swoln veins the boiling torrent flows,  
 And every nerve a separate torture knows.  
 (*Winter*, pp. 86-87).

Bloomfield does not limit the influence of nature to morals and religion, nor even to a social philosophy that includes sympathy for animal life. Throughout *The Farmer's Boy* there are passages of pure zest in life and of the love of action for its own sake. Such a passage is that describing the hunt:

For now the pack, impatient rushing on,  
 Range through the darkest coverts one by one;  
 Trace every spot; whilst down each noble glade  
 That guides the eye beneath a changeful shade,  
 The loit'ring sportsman feels the instinctive flame,  
 And checks his steed to mark the springing game.  
 Midst intersecting cuts and winding ways  
 The huntsman cheers his dogs, and anxious strays  
 Where every narrow riding, even shorn,  
 Gives back the echo of his mellow horn:  
 . . . . .  
 His lifted finger to his ear he plies,  
 And the view halloo bids a chorus rise  
 Of Dogs quick-mouth'd, and shouts that mingle loud,  
 As bursting thunder rolls from cloud to cloud.  
 With ears erect, and chest of vigorous mould,  
 O'er ditch, o'er fence, unconquerably bold,

The shining Courser lengthens every bound,  
 And his strong foot-locks suck the moisten'd ground,  
 As from the confines of the wood they pour,  
 And joyous villages partake the roar. (*Autumn*, pp. 68-69).

This is not great descriptive poetry; some of it is not even good; but it is not lacking in vigor; and a phrase or two like "Dogs quick-mouth'd" and "Chest of vigorous mould" have the real imaginative touch. The lines remind one of Scott's:

Yell'd on the view the opening pack;  
 Rock, glen, and cavern paid them back.

Of actual poetical felicities in *The Farmer's Boy* there are few. That there should prove to be any in a poem which so commonly moves on a plane of uninspired expression is perhaps occasion for surprise. Yet here and there are found even beautiful conceptions, phrased in delicate and not infelicitous form. Such a passage is that in *Spring*:

Where blows the woodbine, faintly streak'd with red,  
 And rests on every bough its tender head;  
 Round the young ash its twining branches meet  
 Or crown the hawthorn with its odors sweet. (p. 20).

In *Autumn* Bloomfield speaks of the fox-hound in the hunt

Foremost o'er fen or level mead to pass,  
 And sweep the show'ring dew-drops from the grass. (p. 71).

This passage reminds us of the lines in Shakespeare descriptive of the hounds whose heads are hung "with ears that sweep away the morning dew," though it is doubtful if Bloomfield ever saw the passage. Or again, when Giles, in early spring, has gone out to the fields:

The sporting White-throat on some twig's end borne,  
 Pour'd hymns to Freedom and the rising Morn;  
 Stopt in her song perchance the starting Thrush,  
 Shook a white shower from the black-thorn bush,  
 Where dew-drops thick as early blossoms hung,  
 And trembled as the minstrel sweetly sung. (p. 11).

Such a passage, though somewhat unduly moralized, yet gives token of a fidelity of observation and a delicacy of appreciation of the beauty of nature attained by few poets. The picture of the thrush, sitting on the black-thorn bush hung with dew-drops that "trem-



bled as the minstrel sweetly sung," is not unworthy of Tennyson at his best. Surely this is as good as the lines in *In Memoriam*:

And on these dews that drench the furze,  
And all the silvery gossamers  
That twinkle into green and gold, (Poem XI).

and this, as portraying the minuter features of nature, is regarded as one of the poet's perfect pictures.

### III

As it was *The Farmer's Boy* that made Bloomfield's reputation, critics have not unnaturally given it most attention. But it is not Bloomfield's best poetry. His best poetry is to be found in his later work and among his occasional poems. These poems are far from being of equal quality; none is of supreme worth; yet there are some that would honor the name of Burns or Wordsworth. The themes of some of these poems appear in *The Farmer's Boy*; but there are other themes and more distinctive notes that especially characterize the later poems.

One of the sweetest notes in Bloomfield,—a note pervading *The Farmer's Boy* but never so charmingly expressed as in his later poems—is his love of the country. Like Wordsworth, Bloomfield was no city poet. And he loved the country, not merely as an escape from the city, but because of the moral and intellectual stimulus it afforded his mind, and because it brought him a supreme joy and happiness. His *Love of the Country*, of which I have quoted the first and last stanzas, reveals this with genuine poetic fervor:

Welcome silence! welcome peace!  
O most welcome, holy shade!  
Thus I prove as years increase,  
My heart and soul for quiet made.  
Thus I fix my firm belief  
While rapture's gushing tears descend,  
There every flower and every leaf  
Is moral Truth's unerring friend.  
Build me a shrine, and I could kneel  
To Rural Gods, or prostrate fall;  
*Did I not see, did I not feel*  
*That one GREAT SPIRIT governs all.*  
O heav'n permit that I may lie  
Where o'er my corse green branches wave;

And those who from life's tumult fly  
With kindred feelings press my grave.

(*Wild Flowers*, p. 89).

Though not so happily expressed, these lines contain a thought and sentiment identical with that in *Tintern Abbey*:

A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought.  
And rolls through all things.

For Bloomfield, love of country was synonymous with love of nature. Love of nature pervades the poem *The Banks of Wye*, and though I do not consider this one of Bloomfield's best poems, there are passages in it that tempt one to quote. A more felicitous expression, however, is found in *Shooter's Hill*. In poor health, Bloomfield seeks the restorative and rejuvenating influence of nature:

I seek thee where, with all his might,  
The joyous bird his rapture tells,  
Amidst the half-excluded light,  
That gilds the fox-glove's pendent bells;  
Where, cheerly up this gold hill's side  
The deep'ning groves triumphant climb:  
In groves Delight and Peace abide,  
And Wisdom marks the lapse of time.

I love to mark the flow'ret's eye,  
To rest where pebbles form my bed,  
Where shapes and colors scatter'd lie  
In varying millions round my head.  
The soul rejoices when alone,  
And feels her glorious empire free:  
Sees God in every shining stone,  
And revels in variety.

(*Wild Flowers*).

Much of this, surely, is equal to Wordsworth; and the idea of the last few lines, original and underived by Bloomfield, is identical with the idea expressed by that poet of nature.

Love of the country was for Bloomfield intimately connected with another of his poetical conceptions: love of native land. England has had poets of infinitely superior genius; but she has had no more ardent patriot than Bloomfield. In *Barnham Water* we find these lines:

Whatever hurts my country's fame,  
When wits and mountaineers deride.

To me grows serious, for I name  
My native plains and streams with pride.

And in *The Banks of Wye* there is a patriotic outburst beginning:

May heav'n preserve our native land  
From blind ambition's murdering hand.

Bloomfield was a pacifist; and in his love of peace and his hatred of the horrors of war, as well as in the vigor and beauty of his expression, he reminds one occasionally of Tennyson. He does so in the following lines

E'en all the joy that Vict'ry brings  
(Her bellowing Guns, her flaming pride)  
Cold, momentary comfort flings  
Around where weeping friends reside.

Whose blighted bud no Sun shall cheer,  
Whose Lamp of Life no longer shine:  
Some Parent, Brother, Child, most dear,  
Who ventur'd, and who died like mine.

Proud crested Fiend, the World's worst foe,  
Ambition; canst thou boast one deed,  
Whence no unsightly horrors flow,  
Nor private peace is seen to bleed. (*The French Mariner*).

A patriotic fervor is found, expressed with a power worthy of Burns or Scott, in the *Song for a Highland Rover Returning from England*:

O Ghosts of my Fathers! O heroes look down!  
Fix my wandering thoughts on your deeds of renown,  
For the glory of Scotland reigns warm in my breast,  
And fortitude grows both from toil and from rest;  
May your deeds and your worth be for ever in view,  
And my Maggy bear sons not unworthy of you. (*Rural Tales*).

Bloomfield, as we know, was acquainted with Burns' work. In *The Banks of Wye* he pays Burns a fine tribute, not unconnected with the theme of patriotism, that we might pause to note:

SPIRIT OF BURNS! the daring child  
Of glorious freedom, rough and wild,  
How have I wept o'er all thy ills,  
How blest thy Caledonian hills!  
How almost worshipp'd in my dreams  
Thy mountain haunts,—thy classic streams!  
How burnt with hopeless, aimless fire,

To mark thy giant strength aspire  
 In patriot themes! and tun'd the while  
 Thy "Bonny Doon," or "Ballock Mile."

In humor, especially in range of perspective, Bloomfield rivals Burns, whom he evidently emulated in many ways, just as he surpasses Wordsworth, whose rustic themes and simple style he manifestly admired. Wordsworth, in spite of his assurance that he has at all times endeavored to look steadily at his object, invariably began with an emotion. The inner experience, not the object, is always his starting point. Chancing upon the biblical phrase: "their life is hidden with God," Wordsworth was deeply moved; the emotion awakened he connected by chance with idiots; whereupon, in all seriousness, he gave us the foolish poem, *The Idiot Boy*, feeling aggrieved even with those of his readers incapable of finding there the depth of emotion he said it contained. From this kind of absurdity, at least, Bloomfield's humor saved him in wholesome fashion. Not only did his humor enable him to take his sorrows and his difficulties with a laugh; it enabled him to laugh, and laugh heartily, when a situation was simply and purely ridiculous. Such a laugh rings out in *The Fakenham Ghost*. A woman, making her way home in the dark, saw a ghost. She fled in terror; but the "trotting Ghost kept on the same!" Finally, the poor woman fell in a faint at her door. As husband and children rush to her rescue, they find the ghost to be "an Ass's Foal" that had "lost its Dam." Thereupon

They took the shaggy stranger in,  
 And rear'd him as their own.

And Bloomfield concludes:

A favorite the Ghost became;  
 And, 'twas his fate to thrive;  
 And long he liv'd and spread his fame,  
 And kept the joke alive. (Rural Tales).

Bloomfield's handling of this amusing situation gives token of an ability elsewhere displayed effectively: the ability to tell a story. This ability is shown at its best in *The Miller's Maid*.<sup>32</sup> A child,

<sup>32</sup> Cf. also *Alfred and Jennet*, in *May Day with the Muses*, the simple and touching story of the love of a blind youth, a member of the aristocracy, for an animated, joyous maid, the daughter of a yeoman. The poem is marked by fine characterization and delicate feeling.

an orphan girl of ten years, shamefully abused by her foster mother, runs away and seeks refuge in the home of the miller and his wife, who are childless. She is taken in, becomes their maid, and is kindly treated. Six years later the miller brings home "a sturdy youth" to assist him in the mill. Soon the youth and the maid fall in love, only to discover that the youth is the girl's brother who had gone off when their mother died, years before. As they had learned to love, not as brother and sister, but as lover and sweetheart, their new-found happiness was stung with sorrow. Then the youth recalled a remark made by his dying mother that both children were not hers. They plan, accordingly, to go and search the records. Just as they are about to start out, a poor old soldier, back from the wars, seeking his children and his former home, arrives on the scene. It soon appears that the old soldier is the father of the maid; the youth, a sister's son; and there is "clear the road for Nature and for Love." The old man is taken into the home; and all settle down in immeasurable happiness.

This story is frankly romantic, as Bloomfield's stories and situations always are; but it is told with considerable skill, dramatic power, and impressiveness. Is it surprising that the poor, who chiefly read these stories, knowing as they did, so much unhappiness and sorrow at first hand, preferred a story closing in a scene of ineffable happiness? And is such a preference after all not an eloquent tribute to the worth and beauty of the central theme of all Bloomfield's poetry: the inalienable right of man to a measure of joy and happiness in life?

This note of happiness rises to heights of true lyric quality in a few of the poems, and these, it seems to me, represent the poet's finest achievement. I shall quote two of these poems: the first, *Rosy Hannah*, a song in *Rural Tales*:

A Spring, o'erhung with many a flow'r,  
The grey sand dancing in its bed,  
Embank'd beneath a Hawthorn bower,  
Sent forth its water near my head:  
A rosy Lass approach'd my view;  
I caught her blue eye's modest beam:  
The stranger nodded "How d'ye do!"  
And leap'd across the infant stream.

The water heedless pass'd away;  
With me her glowing image stay'd:

I strove, from that auspicious day.  
 To meet and bless the lovely Maid,  
 I met her where beneath our feet  
 Through downy Moss the wild Thyme grew:  
 Nor Moss elastic, flow'rs sweet,  
 Match'd Hannah's cheek of rosy hue.

I met her where the dark Woods wave,  
 And shaded verdure skirts the plain;  
 And when the pale Moon rising gave  
 New glories to her cloudy train.  
 From her sweet cot upon the Moor  
 Our plighted vows to Heaven are flown:  
 Truth made me welcome at her door,  
 And rosy Hannah is my own.

The sweet and delicate sentiment of this poem, fusing, as it does, a fine joy in nature and the happiness of man, is surpassed in Bloomfield only by another poem, *Mary's Evening Sigh*, found in *Wild Flowers*. As the lover Edward approaches the valley-home of his sweetheart Mary, he pauses, touched by the glory of the sunset, on a neighboring hilltop. Mary, seeing him, breathes a sigh at his delay:

How bright with pearl the western sky!  
 How glorious far and wide.  
 Yon lines of golden clouds that lie  
 So peaceful side by side!  
 Their deep'ning tints, the arch of light.  
 All eyes with rapture see:  
 E'en while I sigh I bless the sight  
 That lures my love from me.

Descend, my love, the hour is come,  
 Why linger on the hill?  
 The sun hath left my quiet home,  
 But thou canst see him still;  
 Yet why a lonely wanderer stray,  
 Alone the joy pursue?  
 The glories of the closing day  
 Can charm thy Mary too.

Dear Edward, when we strolled along  
 Beneath the waving corn,  
 And both confess'd the power of song,  
 And blest the dewy morn;  
 Your eye o'erflowed, "How sweet," you cried,  
 (My presence then could move)

"How sweet, with Mary by my side,  
"To gaze and talk of love!"

Thou art not false! that cannot be;  
Yet I my rivals deem  
Each woodland charm, the moss, the tree,  
The silence and the stream;  
Whate'er, my love, detains thee now,  
I'll yet forgive thy stay;  
But with to-morrow's dawn come thou,  
We'll brush the dews away.

The subtlety and delicacy with which the sweetheart in this poem <sup>33</sup> is made to appear jealous of the beauties of nature, and the implied gentleness of the lover are justly comparable with the ineffable loveliness of the most delicate lyrics of Burns. It is true poetic quality.

#### IV

Mr. Gosse considers Bloomfield and his work "quite outside the main channels of literary activity." In the sense that Bloomfield did not come directly under the influence of his literary predecessors, and that he did not actively co-operate in the ideals of contemporary poets, the statement is true; but in the sense that he had no part in literary and social movements of his day, had alien interests and wrote upon exotic themes, or that his poetry is uniformly without merit, it is not true. In England, as in France, in Bloomfield's day, writers had begun to dwell upon the inequalities of man. When Rousseau rejected the positive idea of duty,<sup>34</sup> and adopted sensibility as the rule of conduct, he struck a spark which soon became a conflagration, wiping out one side of French life. On the issue involved, England split fairly into two camps. On the radical side the idealists were for making a clean sweep of established government, law, tradition, and belief. Byron represented the passion of this movement. Burns, like Wordsworth in his adolescence, believed that some supreme effort of humanity might swiftly transform social wrong into right. Shelley expressed the pure ideal of the movement dreaming of what humanity might become through the beauty of saving power of intense passion. On the conservative side stood another group of poets, representing

<sup>33</sup> Second stanza omitted.

<sup>34</sup> Wordsworth's *Ode to Duty* was England's supreme poetical answer.

a different ideal. With this side Bloomfield unconsciously aligned himself. Of the suffering and misery out of which radical theories spring, he had abundant personal experience and knowledge; he ardently believed in progress and reform; and he loved freedom with an intensified passion; but he had no sympathy with the extreme radicalism of his time, with the root-and-branch theories that demanded sudden and violent changes in institutions, conditions, and beliefs. Bloomfield pointed to a remedy for the ills of life, not in political and social revolution, assuredly not in war, but in the cultivation of the simple and the homely virtues, in the development of happiness within each heart and home, and in a harmonious adaptation of man to the life of nature. This note, first struck clearly in poetry by Goldsmith and Cowper, later transmuted by the exalted genius of Wordsworth into rapturous and mystical communion with nature as a basis for the happiness of man, was also Bloomfield's own. It was as clear as it was independent; and it puts Bloomfield fairly in the main current of literary movements. And if his influence upon men of genius is finally negligible, though that may be questioned, his influence upon the hearts of the common people was a power. Bloomfield receives no credit for helping to prepare the way for Wordsworth; but in the hearts of thousands of rustic folk the seed for the fine flower of Wordsworth's poetry was implanted by this humble poet.<sup>35</sup>

It was Bloomfield's limitations that prevented him from being a more effective influence in the literary and social movements of his day. To review those limitations in detail would be superfluous. Bloomfield's great limitations, limitations which effectively exclude him from the rank of even the second order of poets, are lack of passion, of profound thought, and of felicitous expression. All might be summed up in saying he lacked imagination. His delicate health; his shy, sensitive nature; and the seclusion of his personal habits were not favorable to the development of that kind of power. To Bloomfield, the controlling forces of life meant more than the impelling forces. The general excellence of his lyrics is below that of Burns, just as the general excellence of his romantic narrative is below that of Scott, and his interpretation of nature below that

<sup>35</sup> Mr. Weston observes: "I have been informed by persons who travel into every quarter of the country, that almost the only books they frequently find, are the Bible and the poems of Bloomfield." *Remains*, I, xvii.



of Wordsworth; for Bloomfield's work, beautiful and effective as it is occasionally, is sustained on no uniform level. Just as Longfellow *tells* us that life is real, life is earnest; and Shakespeare *shows* us that it is both real and earnest; so Bloomfield *tells* us that nature is a source of moral and intellectual inspiration, and the true source of human happiness and faith; but he fails to *show* us, as does Wordsworth, that it is so. Wordsworth did not kill Bloomfield poetically; but the impassioned feeling, the imaginative reach and fervor, and the power and music of the verse of Wordsworth and his school so far surpassed Bloomfield, even at his best, as soon to bury his name in oblivion.

But Bloomfield's limitations are offset, in some measure, by virtues that have been unjustly neglected and ignored, virtues that call for fuller recognition and appreciation: simplicity and sweetness of character, moral earnestness, religious sincerity, democratic sympathy both for his fellowman and for animal life, humor, independence, active and sustained love of nature, confident faith in a reasonable promise of social equality and in man's inalienable right to a measure of happiness on this earth. Bloomfield wrote as he lived, and he lived a good life. Of him, too, it can truly be said that he uttered nothing base. He lacked training in the poetic art, even as he lacked in the endowments that make for impassioned writing; but he displayed compensating qualities not possessed by many of those at whose feet he would be the first to lay his tribute; he rose superior to his environment; vindicated the general rightness of his poetical reaction on life; and created some of the sweetest among the occasional notes of our poetry.

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